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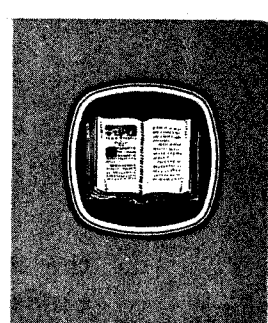
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The Good Books in American Public Libraries: A Summary

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Going on the assumption that the avowed educational objective of the American public library can only be achieved if the library acquires a substantial proportion of the important and significant new books as they are published, a list of the "good" and "notable" books of the last twenty years was prepared for checking with public library catalogs. This list of about 1,200 fiction and non-fiction titles was checked with the card catalogs of 828 public libraries in the United States during the years 1953 to 1956. Many of the results of the completed tabulations were presented in state journals for the libraries covered in each state. This report constitutes a summary of those reports, noted bibliographically on pages 5-6 and considerable new data not previously published.

Each of the four checklists was compiled in two ways. Each contained all of the books originally published during the previous twenty years listed by A. D. Dickinson in his three most recent compilations of the "Best Books," published by the Wilson Company. Books were listed by Dickinson on the basis of a consensus of critical opinion, as gleaned from their appearance on a wide variety of other lists of good books. These books, judged "best" by the critics, were considered to be the kind of books which public libraries might reasonably be expected to buy, and, as is shown below, which most libraries large enough or affluent enough, did buy.

The checklist also included all of the books found on the annual list of "notable" books of the year chosen by a committee of the American Library Association since 1944. These, too, because of the method of choice, were presumed to be books which the fiscally able public library could be expected to buy. The choice of a twenty-year period was in part arbitrary, and in part based on the idea that if these books chosen by critics and librarians were really "best" or "notable," they should reasonably be expected to remain on public library shelves for a minimum of two decades. It should be emphasized that all of these books were new books, published for the first time during

the twenty-year period. The checklist used during each of the four years included the notable books of the previous year and all titles previously chosen for the nineteen years immediately preceding. Thus, for example, the 1956 checklist contained titles published during the years 1936-55. New editions, condensations, compilations were all omitted; an occasional new translation was, however, admitted. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible, for example, is included. All four checklists contained about 25 per cent fiction and 75 per cent non-fiction.

Availability of the list was announced in the Library Journal, the Wilson Library Bulletin, and most of the state and regional library journals. Response was meager, about twenty from each of the national journals, and considerably fewer from each of the state journals. A letter was then sent to every public library, in each of the several states (except Michigan, only a third of which was covered) noted in the accompanying tables. Response, except in California, for which a special and intense follow-up effort was made to obtain relatively complete coverage, averaged somewhat over 15 per cent. So, again, except for California, the libraries included are self-selected, largely on the basis of each librarian's interest in the project and willingness to cooperate. In reading and interpreting the results, it is probably accurate to consider that the study includes the better, larger, more progressive libraries; if the study had included all libraries within a given state (except California) the averages would probably be lower than those shown.

The phrase "Eastern Region" may need further explanation. It includes all those states not separately noted in Table IV. All of the seventy-eight libraries in this "Eastern Region" responded to the published announcement of the availability of the list; no mail solicitation was made in those states. Consequently, the seventy-eight libraries shown under "Eastern Region" include many of the larger libraries found in the eastern portion of the United States.

The results of the tabulation of the whole list are shown in Table I, where the libraries are subdivided according to population and kind of jurisdiction served. If a "substantial proportion" of the checklist is defined as meaning 75 per cent, then only the eighty-eight libraries serving more than 100,000 people succeed in providing a substantial proportion of the "good" and "notable" books as they are published. That the 151 county and regional libraries included in the study did slightly better than the city libraries may be explained by the much larger number of city libraries in the 2,501-7,500 population group, which tend to bring that average down. In all of the other population groups the city libraries held a greater percentage of the checklist titles than did the county and regional libraries. This relationship may be explained in one or both of two ways. County and regional libraries, serving many small outlets, are often apt to duplicate more widely and thus be less

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TABLE I

**Mean Percentage of Titles Held by 828 United States City,
County, Regional, and Parish Libraries**

Size of Population Served	Total		City		County, Regional, and Parish	
	No. of Libs.	Mean % of Titles Held	No. of Libs.	Mean % of Titles Held	No. of Libs.	Mean % of Titles Held
Less than 2,501	145	15.6	139	15.6	6	14.9
2,501 - 7,500	162	30.3	156	30.2	6	31.7
7,501 - 25,000	247	50.4	195	53.1	52	40.0
25,001 - 50,000	121	62.2	77	71.3	44	46.3
50,001 - 75,000	34	69.3	24	76.9	10	51.2
75,001 - 100,000	31	71.3	19	76.8	12	62.6
100,001 - 200,000	48	83.6	35	86.4	13	76.0
200,001 - 1,000,000	33	89.5	26	92.0	7	79.9
More than 1,000,000	7	98.7	6	98.8	1	98.3
TOTAL	828	47.5	677	47.3	151	48.4

able to buy as many different titles. Also, most of the libraries of the larger units are less than twenty years old, and may not have been able to acquire as many of the good books published before their establishment as they normally would.

The general situation is confirmed when the provision of the relatively more important non-fiction is considered separately as is seen in Table II. Here the differential between city and county libraries is about the same as it was for fiction and non-fiction combined, except that the city libraries held a larger proportion of the checklist titles in all population groups, and in the total as well. It is interesting to note, referring now to Table III, that the county libraries did considerably better than the city libraries in their provision of the good and notable fiction titles. Comparative examination of Tables II and III also shows that both city and county libraries did much better in providing the best and notable fiction than they did the non-fiction. It seems clear from these data that public libraries, city and county alike, are much more apt to provide their patrons with the good fiction as it is published than they are the non-fiction.

This conclusion is confirmed and reinforced by an examination of Table IV, where it is seen that in every state for which separate data are

TABLE II

**Mean Percentage of Non-Fiction Titles Held by 828 United States
City, County, Regional, and Parish Libraries**

Size of Popula- tion Served	Total		City		County, Regional, and Parish	
	No. of Libs.	Mean % of Titles Held	No. of Libs.	Mean % of Titles Held	No. of Libs.	Mean % of Titles Held
Less than 2,501	145	11.1	139	11.2	6	8.9
2,501 - 7,500	162	24.1	156	24.1	6	22.5
7,501 - 25,000	247	44.8	195	47.8	52	33.7
25,001 - 50,000	121	57.8	77	68.1	44	39.7
50,001 - 75,000	34	65.6	24	74.4	10	44.5
75,001 - 100,000	31	67.8	19	74.4	12	57.6
100,001 - 200,000	48	81.5	35	85.0	13	71.9
200,001 - 1,000,000	33	88.6	26	91.7	7	76.9
More than 1,000,000	7	98.6	6	98.6	1	98.2
TOTAL	828	42.8	677	42.9	151	42.4

TABLE III

**Mean Percentage of Fiction Titles Held by 828 United States
City, County, Regional, and Parish Libraries**

Size of Popula- tion Served	Total		City		County, Regional, and Parish	
	No. of Libs.	Mean % of Titles Held	No. of Libs.	Mean % of Titles Held	No. of Libs.	Mean % of Titles Held
Less than 2,501	145	29.2	139	29.1	6	32.0
2,501 - 7,500	162	48.9	156	48.8	6	49.2
7,501 - 25,000	247	67.2	195	69.4	52	59.0
25,001 - 50,000	121	75.5	77	80.8	44	66.3
50,001 - 75,000	34	80.6	24	84.5	10	71.4
75,001 - 100,000	31	81.4	19	83.9	12	77.6
100,001 - 200,000	48	89.6	35	90.4	13	87.6
200,001 - 1,000,000	33	92.0	26	92.9	7	88.6
More than 1,000,000	7	99.2	6	99.3	1	98.7
TOTAL	828	61.8	677	60.9	151	66.0

TABLE IV

Mean Percentage of Fiction and Non-Fiction Titles Held
By 828 Public Libraries in 26 States and 4 Regions

State or Region ¹	Number of Libraries	Mean Percentage of Titles Held		
		Total	Non-Fiction	Fiction
Arizona	9	36.2	29.3	55.8
Arkansas	11	43.3	37.4	63.0
California	139	63.6	58.8	77.7
Colorado	9	37.8	32.6	53.4
Idaho	13	35.7	30.2	51.5
Illinois	64	49.4	45.1	63.6
Iowa	56	35.7	31.3	50.3
Kansas	44	35.1	29.5	52.0
Louisiana	16	45.7	41.3	60.0
Michigan	22	56.0	52.2	68.6
Minnesota	38	43.6	38.7	57.8
Mississippi	10	36.2	29.9	56.4
Missouri	34	45.3	39.9	62.8
Montana	16	37.9	32.5	54.1
Nebraska	28	26.2	21.4	37.5
Nevada	3	52.0	45.9	69.6
New Mexico	8	44.9	39.1	62.5
North Dakota	16	22.3	18.5	34.1
Oklahoma	17	45.1	40.5	59.3
Oregon	49	33.6	28.4	48.7
South Dakota	9	34.3	29.1	50.4
Texas	33	51.7	46.9	66.2
Utah	4	36.1	30.5	52.7
Washington	43	50.0	44.8	65.8
Wisconsin	53	50.1	46.3	62.5
Wyoming	6	46.9	40.1	67.7
Eastern "Region" ²	78	61.8	58.7	70.5
TOTALS	828	47.5	42.8	61.8
Mountain-Plains ³	116	31.8	26.8	46.9
Pacific Northwest ⁴	121	40.3	34.9	55.8
Southwestern ⁵	94	47.0	41.6	63.0

¹ Detailed reports on many of these states and one region may be found in the following journals: Arkansas Librarian XIII (April, 1957); California Librarian XVII (July, 1956); Colorado Library Association Bulletin, no. 46 (Sept. 1956); Idaho Librarian VIII (April, 1956); Illinois Libraries XXXIX (June, 1957); Kansas Library Bulletin XXV (Sept. 1956); Bulletin of the Louisiana Library

Table IV - cont.

Association XX (Spring, 1957); Minnesota Libraries XVIII (Dec. 1956); Missouri Library Association Quarterly XVIII (June 1957); Montana Library Quarterly II (Oct. 1956); New Mexico Library Bulletin XV (July, 1956); Oklahoma Librarian VI (Oct. 1956); Texas Library Journal XXIII (Sept. 1956); Wisconsin Library Bulletin LIII (July-Aug. 1957); PNLA Quarterly XX (July, 1956).

² Includes reports from libraries in all states not separately shown in table.

³ Includes reports from libraries in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming.

⁴ Includes reports from libraries in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington.

⁵ Includes reports from libraries in Arizona, Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.

available, provision of the good and notable fiction is greater, usually substantially greater, than the provision of non-fiction. The data herein presented are not sufficiently definitive to support value judgments, but if the general view of the profession, that it is more desirable to provide non-fiction than fiction, is defensible, then it is clear that the public libraries of the United States are not doing nearly as well in providing the good non-fiction as they are in providing the less desirable fiction, however good individual titles are judged to be.

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